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MEMORY WORK IN LITERATURE.¹

It is my purpose this morning to enter a plea for the reintroduction of a method of English training that has of late years fallen into neglect and even into discredit. In my boyhood days, as doubtless in yours, it was the custom in preparatory schools to have the pupils commit to memory selections of prose and verse, and recite them on Friday afternoons. As well as I remember, this practice was begun in the primary grades; I know that it was continued through the grammar-school and high-school grades. As a training in public speaking, I am not sure that this discipline accomplished a great deal; but in broadening insensibly the vocabulary, in revealing hidden harmonies of thought and expression, in developing a feeling for rhythm in poetry and for sentence structure in prose, in enriching the mind with a storehouse of suggestive material that will unfold into new beauty and deeper meaning with advancing years, and above all in fostering a habit that will at last transform a duty of boyhood into a pleasure of manhood, it is my conviction that no other discipline can ever take the place of this systematic memorizing of good literature.

Even memory itself seems today to be a discredited faculty. Memory has, I concede, a troublesome way of slipping out of its own sphere and simulating the functions of reason and judgment. In arithmetic, for example, the teacher cannot be too careful that *memoriter* repetitions shall not usurp the place of independent reasoning. In English grammar the ability to reel off rules and definitions does not imply the ability to speak or to write with even passable correctness. These, however, are the misapplications of memory. No faculty should be judged by its abuse. "Savoir par cœur n'est pas savoir," says Montaigne; but the schools of Montaigne's day stuffed the

¹Read at the annual meeting of the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Southern States, Trinity College, Durham, N. C.

heads of the pupils with an ill-digested mass of learning that cumbered the mind instead of fertilizing it.

Memory has its part to play in school and in life — in school because in life. To neglect its culture in early years is to forego power and resourcefulness in later years. Says Professor James, of Harvard:

In the practical as in the theoretic life, the man whose acquisitions stick is the man who is always achieving and advancing, whilst his neighbors, spending most of their time in relearning what they once knew but have forgotten, simply hold their own. A Charlemagne, a Luther, a Leibnitz, a Walter Scott, any example, in short, of your quarto or folio edition of mankind, must needs have amazing retentiveness of the purely physiological sort. Men without this retentiveness may excel in the *quality* of their work at this point or at that, but will never do such mighty sums of it, or be influential contemporaneously on such a scale.¹

The late Lord Coleridge, chief justice of England, gave his testimony, near the close of his life, in these words:

Speaking as an old lawyer, I may say that few things compare in usefulness with a retentive, accurate memory, and one of the best methods of strengthening it is the habit of learning by heart passages we admire from authors, both in prose and verse. Many of us live to grow old; if we do, our minds, if not ourselves, grow lonely. At such times the recollection of great thoughts, of lovely images, of musical words, comes to us with a comfort, with an innocent pleasure, which it is difficult to exaggerate.

It is not, however, to the duty of developing the memory, or to methods of developing the memory, that I would call attention, but to the value of literature memorized, and memorized in the schoolroom. That this intensive study of models of literature is neglected both in this country and in England it needs no argument to prove. Professor Max Müller, a few years before his death, adverted to this neglect as follows:

I have occasionally given expression to my regret that the old system of learning by heart at our public schools should have gone so completely out of fashion. Old men like myself know what a precious treasure for life the few lines are that remain indelibly engraved on our memory from our earliest school days. Whatever else we forget, they remain; and they remind us by their very sound of happy days, of happy faces, and of happy hearts.²

¹ See *Psychology*, p. 293.

² See *Nineteenth Century*, November, 1899.

Those who occasionally advocate the memorizing of literature in the schools advocate it almost without exception for the elementary schools alone. In 1869 President Eliot said: "In language the first thing that a child should study with persistence and thoroughness is his mother-tongue; and this not through its formal grammar, but by reading aloud, by committing to memory choice bits." In the Report of the Committee of Ten (1894) it is recommended that "not later than the first term of the third school year"—that is, not later than the age of nine—"children should be required to write from dictation and from memory short and easy passages of prose and verse;" but in the committee's recommendations for the study of English in the high school the subject of memorizing is not mentioned. Nor is there any reference to the subject in the Report of the Committee of Fifteen (1895). In a recent work on *The Teaching of English in the Elementary and the Secondary School* (1903) by Professors Carpenter, Baker, and Scott, Professor Baker says that in the elementary schools "it has long been a practice to have children commit to memory bits of good literature. It is to be hoped that the practice will never die out."¹ But if in the elementary school, why not in the high school? The only clear statement that I have been able to find of the importance of memory work in the high school is in the general recommendations of the Conference on Entrance Requirements in English presented at the second annual convention of the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland (1894). Their fourth recommendation is "that a considerable amount of English poetry be committed to memory in preparatory study."²

I would urge upon every high-school teacher in our association the importance of having his pupils commit to memory both prose and poetry. Every reason that can be adduced for "memory gems" in the primary and grammar-school grades can be urged with still greater force for keeping up the practice in the high-school grades. Why begin such a process of training and storing, if it be not worthy of continuation or capable of

¹See p. 176.

²See *Proceedings*, p. 61.

development? Between the child, made forgetful of his surroundings by the spell of nursery rimes or *The Arabian Nights*, and the youth, waking to the larger life in *Silas Marner* or *The Idylls of the King*, there is no real break. Both are but different stages of the same growth, and the one is what makes possible the other. Besides, it is not until the high-school years are reached that the student is capable of memorizing understandingly the prose and poetry that will best minister strength and inspiration in after-life. To have the student discontinue this practice between the years of fourteen and eighteen, the normal high-school years, is to mistake the seed for the harvest, the scaffolding for the building.

I recently submitted to the present freshman class in the University of North Carolina the following questions:

1. Have you ever been required, in your preparatory English training, to memorize prose or verse? Answer in full.
2. What poems, if any, do you know by heart?
3. What prose selections, if any, do you know by heart?
4. In what school or schools were you required to do this work?

The returns showed that 38 per cent. of the class had never been required in their preparatory training to memorize either prose or verse. A few had supplemented the defect in their preparatory course by memorizing on their own initiative; but many of those who had been required to memorize in school had forgotten, before coming to college, what they had once learned or only partially learned. Of the entire class 35 per cent. reported themselves unable to repeat a single selection of prose or verse. These students come from the best high schools and academies in North Carolina and adjoining states. Such a condition of things is, to say the least, far from satisfactory.

In discussing briefly what seem to me the special advantages of memorizing select models of literature in both the elementary and the secondary schools, I deem it unnecessary to consider whether the pupil is to stop at the high school or to continue his studies at a college. The high school may not be the people's college, but, apart from its function as a link between the grammar school and the college proper, the high

school has a field of its own to cultivate and a service of its own to fulfil. In the quality of the English training to be given it makes no difference whether the student is to go from the high school into college or into active life. The entrance requirements in English adopted by nearly all the colleges in the United States are conceived on a liberal basis and are as fitting for the one as for the other.

The phase of my subject that has been generally overlooked is the practical aid that memorizing gives the student in writing and speaking his own language. I shall omit, therefore, all reference to the ethical influence or to the purely literary value of noble thoughts stored in the memory, and shall discuss the subject only as it relates to the use of the English language.

1. The first advantage to be conferred by memorizing prose or verse is in the broadening and enriching of the student's vocabulary. This position should need no elaboration; but the word "vocabulary" is used in senses so vague and varying as to be almost meaningless. What constitutes a writer's or a speaker's vocabulary? In the larger sense, a man's vocabulary includes all the words whose meanings he knows. This, at least, is his reading vocabulary. But this vocabulary is made up of two very different groups of words. The first group includes the words which he has never used either in writing or in speaking. He knows the meanings of these words and interprets them the moment they are read or heard; but he has never organized them into his own speech-use. The second group includes the words which he actually uses in speaking and writing. These words he has so assimilated as to make them the ready messengers of his own thoughts.

The first group is a vocabulary of knowledge; the second is a vocabulary of power. The one is static, the other dynamic. Our static vocabulary is always larger than our dynamic vocabulary. A pupil does well to increase his static vocabulary. He does vastly better to increase his dynamic vocabulary. Every time a word passes from his static vocabulary into his dynamic vocabulary, there is an access of power. Shakespeare's merit is not that he knew the meanings of sixteen thousand words, but

that sixteen thousand words accompanied with him to do his instant bidding. Webster's *Primary Dictionary* contains twenty thousand words. An examination of the range of words included in it convinces me that most college graduates have a reading knowledge of at least twenty thousand words, but they use only about a fourth of them. For the remaining three-fourths they use other words in more or less inaccurate senses, or resort to cumbrous periphrases. The problem is not so much of more words as of better words.^x

What steps are we taking to bring the student's unused words into daily use? Is not the emphasis constantly put upon rare and unfamiliar words? In the college-entrance requirements, for example, the pupil is told to look up the meanings of all words unknown to him. So he should, but some other discipline is needed. The emphasis, not only in his written exercises, but in his study of literature, should be put upon the growth of his dynamic vocabulary, rather than of his static vocabulary.

Lycidas is one of the poems assigned for special study in the high schools until the year 1908. The annotated editions call the student's attention to the following words: *crude* meaning *unripe*, *scatter* meaning *shatter*, *welter* meaning *toss about*, *coy* meaning *hesitating*, *battening* meaning *fattening*, *westering* meaning *moving westward*, *tempered* meaning *attuned*, *gadding* meaning *straggling*, *steep* meaning *mountain*, *rout* meaning *crowd*, *meditate* meaning *muse on*, *clear* meaning *noble*, *sacred* meaning *devoted*, *sanguine* meaning *bloody*, *amain* meaning *with power*, *enow* meaning *a considerable number*, *scrannel* meaning *thin*, *apace* meaning *rapidly*, *use* meaning *abide*, *rathe* meaning *early*, *freaked* meaning *spotted*, *anon* meaning *shortly*, *tricks* meaning *sets in order*, *laves* meaning *washes*, *unexpressive* meaning *inexpressible*, and *twitched* meaning *drew tightly around him*. How many of these words will the high-school student take into his own working vocabulary? How many could he be expected to take? Not one. But if he has committed to memory a section of *Lycidas*, the mere exertion of

^x"Let the accent of words be watched, by all means, but let their meaning be watched more closely still, and fewer will do the work. A few words, well chosen and well distinguished, will do work that a thousand cannot, when everyone is acting equivocally in the function of another."—RUSKIN, *Sesame and Lilies*.

memorizing, together with the drill of repetition, will tend to absorb these memorized words into his own speech-consciousness; they will almost necessarily be drawn into his own working vocabulary; and his daily speech will gain in power and adequacy. There will also be inculcated "the habit of looking intensely at words"—a habit indispensable to anyone who aspires to use language worthily.

2. Let us next consider memorized passages as a safeguard against bad grammar and as a preparation for appreciating the rules and distinctions of grammar. English grammar differs from all other subjects in that the influences of home and street are so often antagonistic to it. In the case of other subjects, the home environment may be favorable; it can hardly be actively unfavorable. However illiterate the pupil's associates may be, their influence cannot be hostile to geography, or to arithmetic, or to history, or to any foreign language; but in the case of English, the few hours spent in the schoolroom are expected to counteract the inherited practice of the pupil himself as well as the daily influence of his unlettered environment. It is evident that some more lasting discipline must reinforce the work of the teacher.

The mere reading of good literature outside the schoolroom produces in most cases hardly an appreciable effect upon the pupil's speech. There is not a teacher of English in our association who has not often heard his pupils, fresh from the pages of some juvenile masterpiece, describe a specially interesting scene or hair-breadth escape in language that would afford grounds for the charge of assault and battery against the author's English. Nor will a drill in the mere rules of grammar avail. The teacher is opposing what is temporary and occasional to what is inherited and ingrained; he is merely spraying the surface for what lies below the surface.

Take, for example, the combination "him and me," the forms used after a preposition or a transitive verb. The pupil knows this combination, but not in these forms. He has been accustomed to say "me and him" or, when on dress parade, "he and I." He has probably never once heard "him and me," for

the social circles in which these forms are correctly used are so few as to be negligible in our estimate. Suppose, however, that he has memorized even one selection in which "him and me" or "her and me," or "him and them," is properly used. His ear will have been partly trained; a norm will have been established; the rule of grammar will then attach to something already felt; and this particular expression will become a touchstone by which to test the correctness of similar expressions.

In many cases the rules of grammar relate to idioms that are wholly unfamiliar and meaningless to the pupil—idioms that he has never heard. The nominative absolute is a case in point. In such sentences as, "I being there at daybreak, the hunt began a few minutes later," or "He failing to meet us, the journey came to an end," the grammarians put the emphasis on the case of the pronoun, cautioning the pupil not to use the objective case. There is not much danger of his using the objective or any other case. The construction is probably new to him, or at least unassimilated. He would have said, "I was there, and the hunt began a few minutes later," and "He failed to meet us, and the journey came to an end." The nominative absolute is a thoroughly English construction, but, being practically unknown in conversation, has no place in the grammatical consciousness of most boys in the grammar school. It is usually not until the student starts the study of Latin or Greek, and gets broken in to the ablative absolute or genitive absolute, that he begins to have a feeling for the nominative absolute construction.

The same may be said of many uses of the subjunctive, of the present participle, of relative pronouns, and of dependent clauses in general. The pupil's range of construction is limited almost entirely to those employed in conversation; but the rules and processes of grammar are based on written English, and in written English the range of construction is coextensive with the resources of the language itself. Hence the need of committing to memory selections of prose and verse. Such selections supplement the structural limitations of spoken English and epitomize the results of years of mere reading. They not only safeguard the pupil, therefore, against incorrect usage, but impress upon

his mind in advance the concrete facts upon which the principles of grammar are based. Without this preparation the study of grammar must necessarily be uninteresting and unimproving.

3. As a last point let us notice the value of memorized passages in the study of rhetoric and the higher forms of constructive English. Such studies are usually almost barren of result; they teach the student to define and to identify figures of speech and forms of discourse, but rarely to assimilate and to use them. The memorizing of one characteristic paragraph from Addison, Goldsmith, Burke, Scott, Carlyle, George Eliot, and Macaulay—to mention only the prose writers assigned for the college-entrance requirements—will give the student a firmer grasp of the varieties of English style, and a greater facility in their use, than would the mere reading of all the prose now required.

With this secure basis for comparison and contrast the student will find the more advanced study of English style a constant challenge and a constant delight. Perception will become apperception. The distinctions made by the rhetoricians will correspond, not to abstractions, but to realities. Definitions will be seen to fit, not only the passages expressly cited, but that wider field of expression which the student has already made peculiarly his own. Formal rules will be looked at, not as impositions, but as embodiments. And on some memorable day, when the student shall pit the so-called rule against its victorious violation by a master, he will have passed from the aqueduct to the fountain, and have entered upon the heritage of a freeman's speech.

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